

Today no other country on earth is arguably more dangerous than Pakistan. It has everything Osama bin Laden could ask for: political instability, a trusted network of radical Islamists, an abundance of angry young anti-Western recruits, secluded training areas, access to state-of-the-art electronic technology, regular air service to the West and security services that don't always do what they're supposed to do. (Unlike in Iraq or Afghanistan, there also aren't thousands of American troops hunting down would-be terrorists.) Then there's the country's large and growing nuclear program. "If you were to look around the world for where Al Qaeda is going to find its bomb, it's right in their backyard," says Bruce Riedel, the former senior director for South Asia on the National Security Council.

The conventional story about Pakistan has been that it is an unstable nuclear power, with distant tribal areas in terrorist hands. What is new, and more frightening, is the extent to which Taliban and Qaeda elements have now turned much of the country, including some cities, into a base that gives jihadists more room to maneuver, both in Pakistan and beyond.

TENDANCE PHOTO

THE SAFE HAVEN PROVIDED BY PAKISTAN has already had dire effects on U.S. and NATO efforts to fight the resurgent Taliban next door in Afghanistan. Taliban fighters now pretty much come and go as they please inside Pakistan. Their sick and injured get patched up in private hospitals there. Guns and supplies are readily available, and in the winter, when fighting

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traditionally dies down in Afghanistan, thousands retire to the country's thriving madrassas to study the Qur'an. Some of the brainier operatives attend courses in computer technology, video production and even English. Far from keeping a low profile, the visiting fighters attend services at local mosques, where after prayers they speak to the congregation, soliciting donations to support the war against the West. "Pakistan is like your shoulder that supports your RPG," Taliban commander Mullah Momin Ahmed told NEWSWEEK, barely a month before a U.S. airstrike killed him last September in Afghanistan's eastern Ghazni province. "Without it you couldn't fight. Thank God Pakistan is not against us."

Dozens of Taliban commanders have moved their wives and children to Pakistan, where they live in the suburbs of cities like Peshawar and Islamabad. This keeps them out of the reach of Afghan authorities, who have been known to arrest relatives in order to track down guerrilla fighters. Mullah Shabir Ahmad is a member of the Taliban's 30-man ruling council, or shura. He's moved his family to a modest neighborhood of nearly identical brick and mud-brick houses in Quetta.

In Washington, a senior administration official involved in counterterrorism said U.S. intelligence is chronically fearful that Islamists might get hold of nuclear material, equipment or know-how in Pakistan. He recalled that after 9/11, a group of rogue Pakistani nuclear scientists met with Osama bin Laden. "Given that history, we continue to look at this issue very closely," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.